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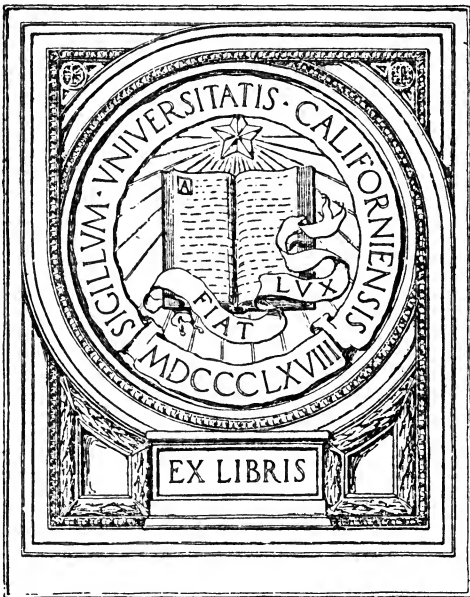
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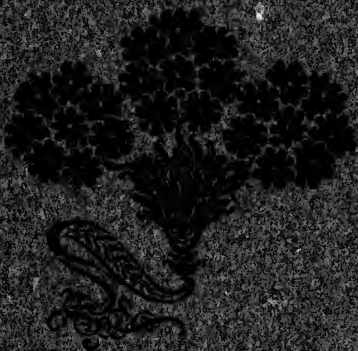
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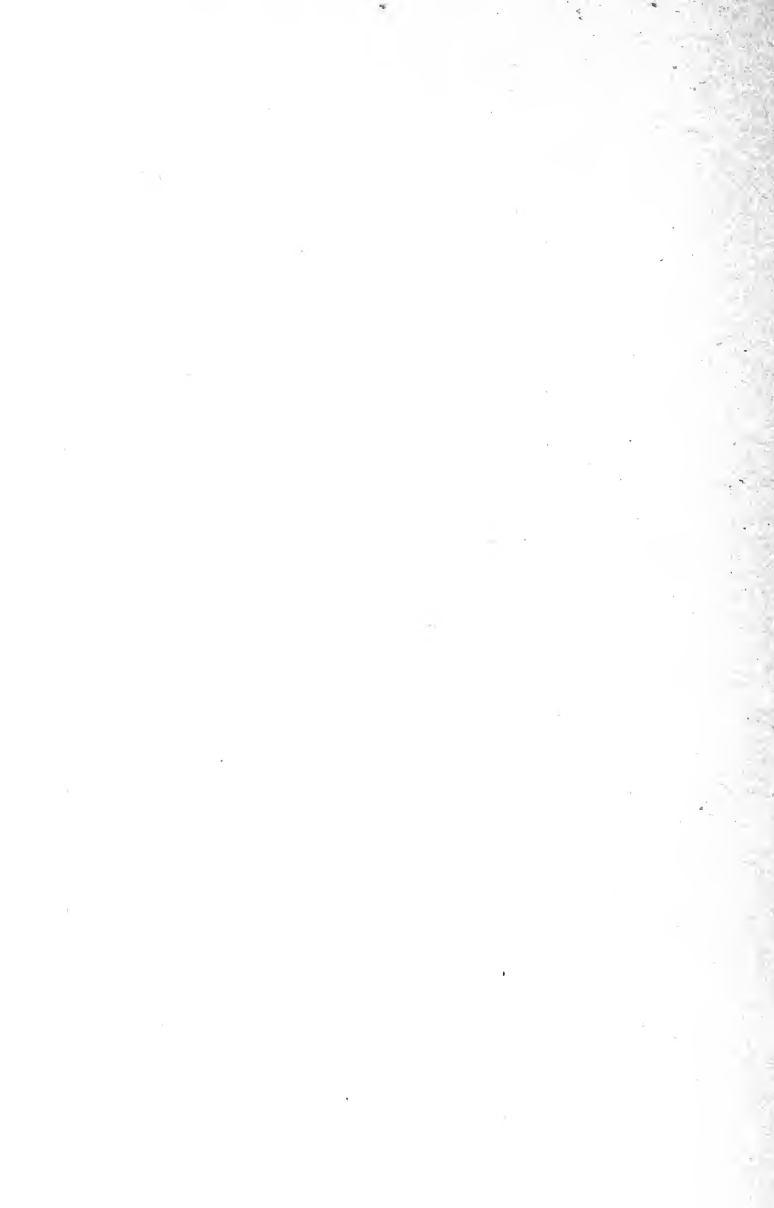


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In the Christmas Woods

ADELINE KNAPP





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“Coming up the Trail toward the Daylight.”

IN THE CHRISTMAS WOODS

*Being the introductory essay of a series on
observations of nature through the year*

BY

ADELINE KNAPP

Author of "Upland Pastures," Etc.

With an illustration by William Keith

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RAIN UP THE MOUNTAIN.

Along the serried slopes a white shape creeps,
Through oak-fringed cañon ways, and up the steeps,
A mystery of silent, shrouding deeps ;
Like spirit touching earth while Nature sleeps.

It stirs beneath the laurels, stirs within
The redwood's circling shade, and light and thin,
Where the brown towhee builds, and spiders spin,
Shuts the twist manzanita's tangle in.

With swaying tops and quivering leaves adart,
Held for a while within the mist's white heart
Like shadowy travelers ready to depart—
Tall, wavering shapes of eucalyptus start.

From far below, where level spreads the plain ;
Traveling with jeweled feet the hastening grain,
Touching the slumbering hills to life again,
Marching along the summits, comes the rain !



OF BEAUTY.

We ought to observe that even the things that follow after the things which are produced according to nature contain something pleasing and attractive. . . . The ears of corn bending down, and the lion's eyebrows, and the foam which flows from the mouth of wild boars, and many other things—tho they are far from being beautiful if a man should examine them severally—still, because they are consequent upon the things which are formed by nature, help to adorn them, and they please the mind; so that if a man should have a feeling and deeper insight with respect to the things which are produced in the universe, there is hardly one of those which follow by way of consequence, which will not seem to him to be in a manner disposed so as to give pleasure. . . . And in an old woman and an old man he will be able to see a certain maturity and comeliness, and the attractive beauty of young persons he will be able to look upon with chaste eyes, who has become truly familiar with nature and her works.

MARCUS AURELIUS ANTONINUS.



IN THE CHRISTMAS WOODS.

WHEN Nature decides that her Christmas gift to us shall be a rain-storm, she does not send any niggardly shower. It is raining in earnest; not the swift, drenching downpour of earlier winter, that washes the earth of its summer garb of dust, nor the small rain upon the tender grass of Springtime, but a steady, penetrating descent of water from a leaden-gray sky, with the wind in the South. It is good for all day. My farmer neighbor cocks a shrewd eye skywards and says it is "raining twenty-dollar-gold-pieces," and he ought to know.

From my window I watch the beneficent downpour and think of the white, feathery snowflakes that, in my Eastern home, always made Christmas day seem to me so much more the orthodox festival than rain can possibly do; yet it may have rained on that first Christmas day when Hope was born into the world. It could not have been snowing. Nor could the rainstorm, if there was one, have been more inviting than this one seems. The drops chasing one another down the outside of the pane strike the glass with a little musical tinkle that summons me abroad. It may not be prudent to venture, but it is a good thing, at times, not to be

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wise enough to keep indoors when it rains, and I find myself longing to go forth and take my share of Nature's beautiful Christmas gift. A happy thought, that. I am quick to act upon it, and soon go tramping through the rain, eager to learn how my friends of wood and cañon are enjoying their wet Christmas.

The birds, I find, have fled to the thickest shelter they can find—the redwoods in the cañon. They have no pockets, and no use even for aqueous twenty-dollar-pieces; so they summon what philosophy they can to tide them over the storm. Swinging down a slippery trail I catch an overhanging bough, to save myself from a fall, and incidently disturb a feathered congregation that has taken refuge in this particular tree. I shake the branch and the birds rush out. The rain is sheeting down from the strip of sky just visible between the towering hills, and the startled flock fly heavily, with many a chirping protest, to another tree, where they perch and huddle again.

A solitary brown towhee, sleek and trim, is pecking about in the soft leaf-mold, with the air of mackintosh and over-shoed comfort that this bird always wears in a storm. The little creature has somehow learned the secret of unfailing contentment. He reminds me, when I see him under adverse circumstances, of that other object-lesson in cheerfulness, the wee pimperl, sunny-faced anagallis, growing so bravely about the hills. In very early Springtime, when everything is green and lusty after the winter

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rains, the pimpernel holds up its head for its share of the good things of plant life everywhere abounding. But when the other flowers and weeds have had their day; when even the burr-clover has ripened and fallen, on the dry hilltops, in the bare meadows, where the burnt earth shows great cracks made by the hot sun, the pimpernel still blossoms cheerily, a picture of humble happiness. The brown towhee is the plainest of our birds. He is not graceful; he cannot sing; he has only the charm of brisk cheeriness, unfailing, gentle acceptance of sunshine or cloud, as each comes, to recommend him to us, but he is always a welcome sight about garden or hedge.

I am interested to note the effects of the storm in the cañon. Here flows a swift, deep stream, always cold and usually clear. Evidently the wind has been at work, for across the creek, its spreading arms lifted as in appeal against its fate, a great alder lies, broken square off some six feet from its base. As I approach I hear the sharp "tap, tap" of a woodpecker's horny ax, and see the bird fly away. A good carpenter he, by his chips. He has thrown down a considerable pile of clean-cut bits of the hard, yellow wood. They look as tho they had been cut by a tiny broadax. Crawling under the fallen tree I advance along the bank, but soon find my progress barred by a landslide. The softened earth above has given way, to slip down into the deep cut. Nothing but bed-rock is left, and the bare gray bones of the mountain

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glisten, wet with the driving rain. The sight awakens both awe and pity. I am glad to see how the mosses are hastening to clothe the rocks again. Tiny spikes of the "horsetail" are already growing where, I am sure, horsetail has not grown for generations.

I climb on, through the exposed roots of an immense redwood stump, a relic of the forest primeval, driving a wood-rat scampering from his haunts as I do so, and come out on a slope of soft leaf-mold. Here the broad green leaves of the trillium are already above ground, the buds beginning to show a small green spike. The Solomon's seal is peeping up to give Christmas greeting, but everything is wet. The trillium lies prostrate, its leaves on the ground; blackberry, huckleberry and wild currant are soaked and wind-blown; the redwoods droop and drip, with here and there a branch broken by its own wet weight. Nevertheless, the scene is not cheerless. There is so much of hope in the quiescent greenery, and the fresh, wet scent of the earth is full of promise.

It is surprising how much rain finds its way into the cañon. It might be supposed that such a narrow cleft between two lines of high hills would escape notice; but the water pours in from above; it sweeps through on the searching wind; it flows down the wooded banks, from the hilltops, and the little stream becomes a river. The rain whips and patters and plays musically among the trees, and roars along with the creek until everything is wetter

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than the proverbial drowned rat ; but it does not make mud-puddles ; it does not bring the same dirt and discomfort in its wake that it does where man makes his abode. The soft, fragrant, brown mold receives it gladly ; the mosses soak it up ; the trees catch it in their outstretched hands and turn it gently down upon their own thirsty roots ; the broad-leaved plants lie down before it and arise, refreshed, when it has passed. It comes, the rain from heaven, as cleanser and life-giver, and even I, soaked by its downpour, bewildered by the rush and sweep of wind and storm, touched by a little mortal fear at the strangeness of it all, am the better for such a wetting. Let but a single sunbeam sift through the branches and the woods will smile like a happy child after its bath.

Scrambling up the side of a moss-grown rock I come face to face, on the top, with a huge snail. To my great surprise I get a glimpse of a queer, dog-like visage, with snub nose and bright eyes ; then the creature pulls its soft, shelly hood down over its head and I can see only its round, resolute-looking shoulders. I poke it in the back, but it only hunches itself together and rolls over ; I cannot get another peep at its head. That passing glimpse of the sturdy, bull-dog face, however, helps me understand the persistence with which, once they are started, these creatures travel forward. One, crossing my dooryard not long ago, found his way barred by the house. Nothing daunted, he mounted the steps, traversed the platform and

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started upward. He left a long, silvery trail on the screen door and gained the wall. I watched him crawl past the eaves to the roof, and I have no doubt but that in the course of time he came down on the other side. Another of the same tribe I once found halted at the edge of a stream a few feet wide. I pushed him out on a chip and ferried him over, whereupon he started up the bank without a backward glance at me who had so opportunely played Providence for him.

The rain must have slackened somewhat up above. There is less beating in, but the creek still roars turbulently. I have reached, in my clambering progress, a place where the water tosses itself joyfully over a great rock to fall into a deep, wide pool, so dark and so still that even the tumult of the storm seems hardly to have reached it. It is dim and green and quiet here; for the sunlight never penetrates to this spot. The tops of the hills seem almost to meet, two hundred feet above our heads, and the redwood growth is dense. The air is heavy with damp, woodsy fragrance and the water is almost black. We talk of Mother Earth, but we might with even more truth speak of Mother Water; for every evidence, to-day, is that the first life appeared, not from the soil, but nurtured at the broad breast of Mother Sea, even ere land had pushed its way up from ocean's depths. The green scum on the surface of still pools; the slime molds covering moist bottoms, furnish us with some indication of what this primordial vegetation was

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like, but by what long process of evolution has come from that common ancestor the miniature forests of the mosses on yonder rocks, the ferns clothing the banks, the wild begonia here at my feet, the osiers yonder in the stream, the towering redwoods themselves, who can tell?

The story is our story. Only here and there, however, are we able to read a line, a paragraph, never a full page of the wonderful tale, but if it be not true that the same life which is in us is also, in kind, throughout all Nature, then I see no reason why human beings should take any interest in Nature, or feel any sympathy with her processes. But the very possibility of our taking interest in the life of Nature, of our feeling true sympathy with it, is evidence of our unity with the least of her creatures. We may not wrest from Nature all her secrets, but we cannot go to her in simplicity of spirit and come away empty-hearted. That which baffles us but increases our love; for something of her teaching lies hidden even in the mystery. The same Love that brought the Christ child to earth is in the woods to-day, informing it with beneficent purpose for our strengthening and teaching.

A very wise man once told me that all life comes from protoplasm, and that if we but knew the conditions we could make the protoplasm. Not a bad idea, that; but if, some day, we should stumble upon the conditions, make the protoplasm, set it agoing and exploit it in the newspapers, we may be sure that there would come a day when the

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wonder would again be beyond our comprehension. Life itself is a greater mystery than its causation. If we could understand even such a comparatively small matter as a bird's way of looking at life, how much of marvel would clear itself in our minds!

We cannot understand even that, however. We can only, after all, love and reverence the things of Nature as they seem to us good and helpful, and come into the use through recognition of the beauty. They are facts, as we, ourselves, are facts, and in reality we understand them about equally well as we understand our own hearts and lives. A wee humming-bird flew about my head yesterday, poised, on swift wings, directly before my face, and I looked into his bright, fearless eyes. I do not know what he thought of me; but neither do I know, really, what I thought of him. Our lives touched, for the brief instant of that glance, and through him came to me a thought of human love. I was better for the encounter, and I do not think that he was worse.

Here where the earth has slid away from the roots of a great redwood stump I have found a long, creeping rootstock of the Solomon's seal, with no less than ten round, seal-like impressions left by past shoots. At some time in its growth the plant encountered an obstacle in the shape of a strong, outstretching arm of redwood root. The tender growth, striking against this, from beneath, was turned backward, and downward, until, feeling its way cautiously in the dark, it traveled around the

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big root, and striking upward sent out a joyful shoot to greet the sun. How long it must have taken the rootstock to do this we cannot surmise, but I suppose that, could we watch these underground happenings, we should find this sort of thing occurring frequently. We should not, however, be likely to discover the real secret of the plant's growth, its branchlets toward the sun, its roots downward in search of water. We only know that neither root nor flower has any choice but to turn toward that which is its good. The necessity to growth, of obedience to the laws of good, is everywhere the most inexorable of Nature's teachings. The plants, guided by instinct, make no mistake in following the good. Higher in the scale, where a measure of reason is added to instinct, as in the case of the birds, we find the possibility of error appearing, and mistakes in judgment are not infrequent among these. Only in man, however, do we find the power to retrieve mistakes, consciously and voluntarily to retrace the wrong course and begin anew, and only with man does the perilous power exist to choose between following the good and turning from it.

The rain has fairly ceased now. The birds have begun to stir among the trees, hopping from branch to branch, shaking themselves and ruffling out their wet feathers. They keep up a sort of indefinite chatter among themselves the while, commenting, it may be, on the probable good that will accrue from the generous Christmas wetting.

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Coming up the trail toward daylight, for it has grown dark in the cañon, I meet a flock of quail, beautiful creatures, that survey me fearlessly as I pass. I hope no Christmas pot hunter will find them and carry them home, a trophy of his day's sport. How any human being who has ever seen a flock of quail in all their living, alert beauty, can take pleasure in picking the poor little bones of the slaughtered birds is another of the mysterious things of life. I came, some time ago, with a party of trappers, to an open space amid the chaparral, on the crest of a chain of hills. Suddenly the leader of our group motioned silence and stood, with parted lips and smiling, delighted eyes, gazing at a flock of quail quietly making their way through the grass, with glossy feathers stirring in the breeze and crested heads held fearlessly high.

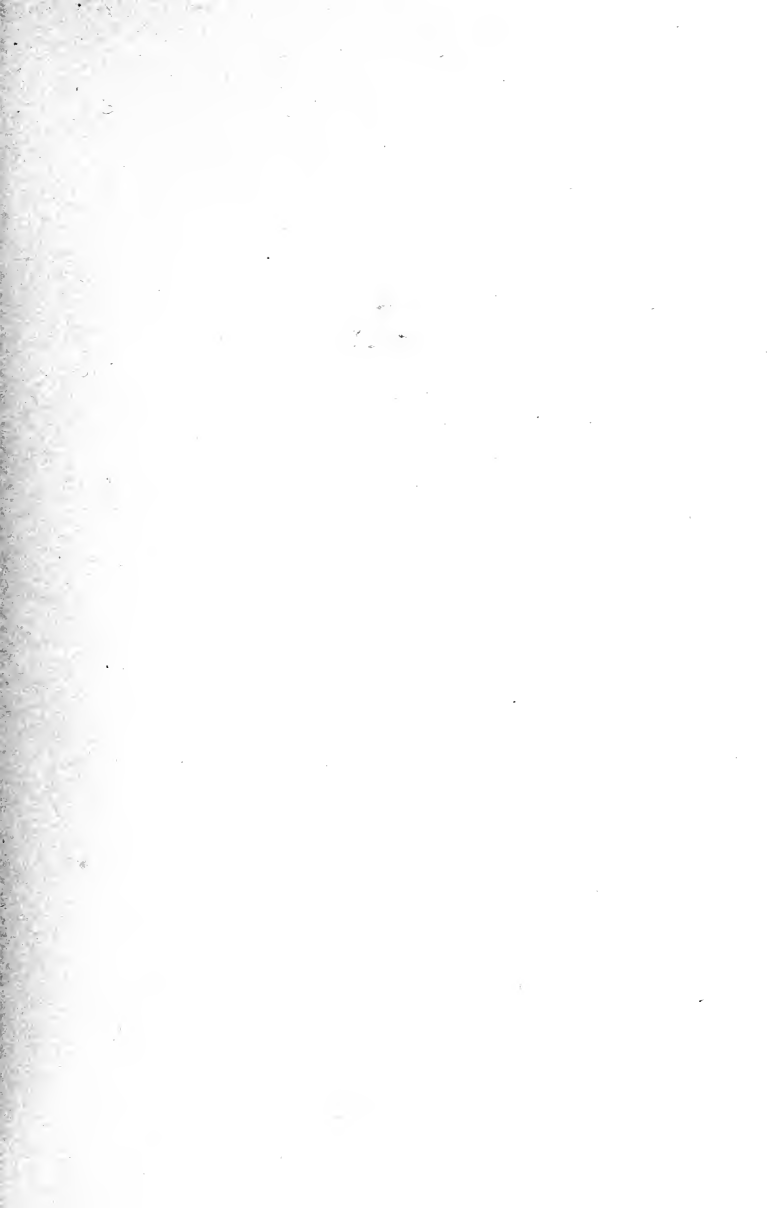
"Did you ever see anything more beautiful?" whispered their discoverer; but the Nimrod of the party wrung his weaponless hands and wailed:

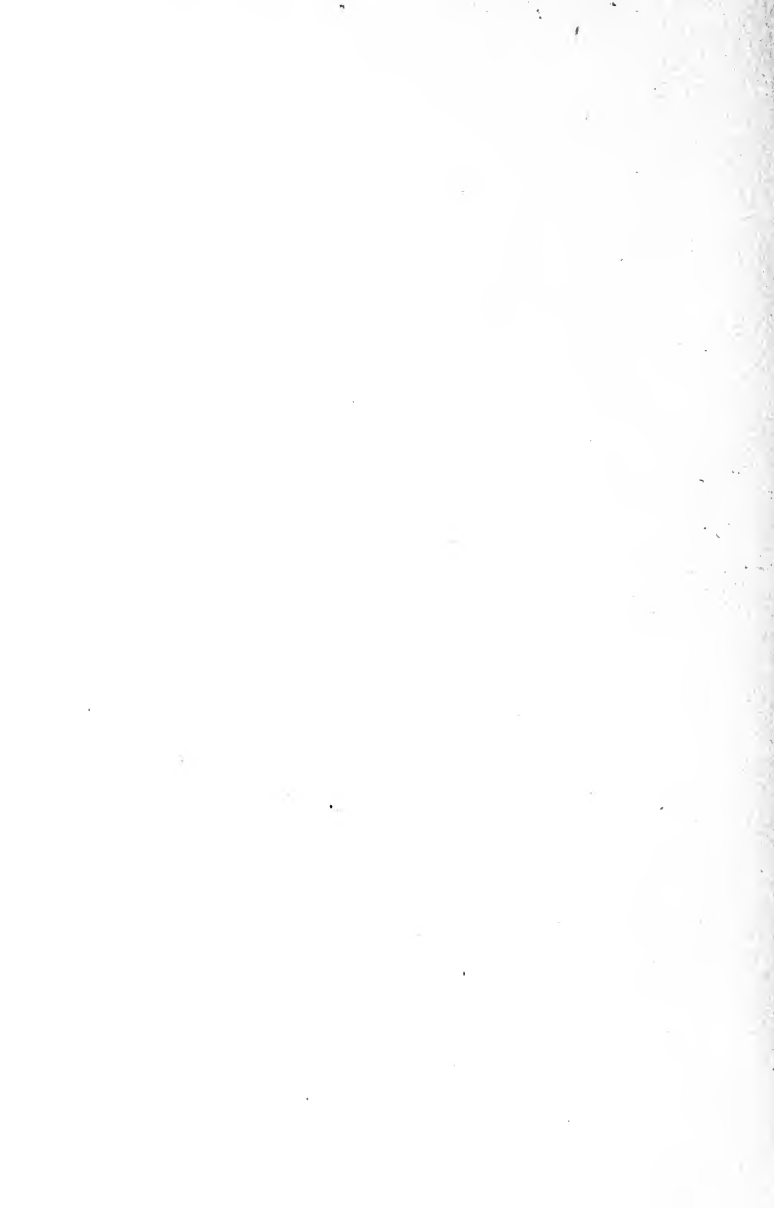
"What a shot! Oh, what a shot!"

Verily, that first man went down to his house justified, rather than the other.









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